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ABSTRACT

This paper offers reflections on the collaborative development of a school/university partnership so as to provide insights into the inherent challenges and successes of such work. It focuses on The Learning Connections Lab (LCL), which began in 1997. The LCL was a partnership between St. Cloud State University and two elementary school sites. To measure the effects of the collaboration, a qualitative case-study methodology was used. Data were collected from semistructured interviews, teacher journals, and surveys. Results show that, overall, the elementary school teachers and university faculty were positive about the collaborative nature of the LCL. They appreciated the opportunity to get to know colleagues and felt that collaboration aided their thinking. Teachers also felt more empowered throughout the collaboration process. However, the collaboration continued at just one of the sites. Whereas the successful site saw a strengthening of prior relationships with the university, the failed site featured strong personalities, inadequate personal boundaries, inflexible attitudes, unclear roles, a lack of trust, and a lack of respect. Findings underscore the importance of basing collaborations on honest, trusting relationships, and it is recommended that future collaborations begin with partners taking time to build relationships, establish a shared vision, and define their goals. (Contains 13 references.) (RJM)

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Collaboration: A Tale of Two Sites

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Collaboration: A Tale of Two Sites

Introduction

The development of partnerships between public schools and teacher education programs has experienced tremendous growth since the mid-1980's. The Holmes Group has urged us to create "in essence, a new institution…a school for the development of novice professionals, for continuing development of experienced professionals, and for the research and development of the teaching profession (1990, p.1). The two worlds of schools and universities differ from each other in many significant ways (Collins, 1995; Darling-Hammond, 1994). It is inevitable that this relationship, like any new alliance, creates dissonance. It is this very uncertainty that can lead to new and innovative ideas and make partnerships a complex, yet exciting venture. As we enter into partnerships, it is critical to heed Levine's advice, "PDSs are not about university educators 'fixing' schools; and they are not about school-based practitioners telling academics what they do wrong. They are about building parity in a relationship where each partner is recognized for his or her essential contributions" (1997, p.69). The purpose of this paper is to share reflections on the collaborative development of a school/university partnership and to provide insights into the inherent challenges and successes of the work.

The Learning Connections Laboratory

Our project, The Learning Connections Lab (LCL) began in earnest in the fall of 1997. St. Cloud State University (SCSU) is one of the top ten producers of teachers in the nation, graduating over 650 teachers a year. While SCSU has a rich history of collaborative work with area schools, no formal Professional Development School (PDS) structure was in place in 1997. The impetus for the increased discussion about a PDS grew out of the possibility of future funding from the state for the creation of "lab" schools. Representatives from SCSU and School District 742 began meetings to discuss what a partnership could look like and collaboratively designed and submitted a proposal that was ultimately funded by the state of Minnesota.

Two elementary sites were selected to participate in the partnership. Selections were based on criteria jointly agreed upon and including such factors as numbers of pupils receiving free/reduced lunches, amount of diversity, proximity to campus, previous experience in collaboration, approval by faculty and administration. Site A is a large K-6 building with over 800 students. Site B is a preK-3 school with about 250 students. Both sites have large numbers of students considered at-risk because of economic situations and frequent transitions. Participants in the partnership included public school teachers, university faculty and students, families, business partners, and service learning volunteers.

With funding in hand, the journey toward creating a "shared vision" for innovative teaching strategies in literacy and lifework skills and providing a new field-based preparation program for preservice teacher education was on its way. As is typical of most partnerships, teachers in the schools perceived the partnership as a way to adopt new curricula and have extra hands in the classroom. Faculty perceived the LCL as a means to prepare teachers in the "real world" of public schools. The challenges we faced in merging and achieving the goals collaboratively reflect stories from PDSs around the country. However, had we been aware of some of the obstacles we would encounter, we might have been better able to avoid or solve them. Our purpose in presenting our journey is to assist those who may be in earlier stages of collaborating and can learn from our experiences.

The Process of Collaboration

Collaboration is a method of enhancing professional development through the sharing and reflecting on practice and educational reforms by teachers and university faculty (Kyle & McCutcheon, 1984; Skau, 1987). Collaboration arises from mutual interests and goals and demands time, flexibility, organization, energy, willingness to learn and grow together and trust among the committed fore players (Lieberman, 1986). While the concept appears simple, partnership designs are most often very complex (Sirotnik & Goodlad, 1988). Forming a school/university partnership involves on-going

efforts at understanding cultures, establishing relationships, defining roles, developing curriculum, and delineating the decision-making process. As we attempt to objectively reflect on the process of collaboration during our first year as a partnership, we can elaborate on issues, misperceptions, high points of connection, and ways to better work together as we forge ahead.

In the LCL, as in any partnership, collaborative efforts caused anxiety, disagreements, and for some, pain. Yet, with all its negative consequences, the collaboration also yielded new relationships, insights, and celebrations. We became a new entity that proved to be stronger than any of its individual constituents. At the end of the first year, the fact that one school, Site A, decided to continue as a PDS, while Site B decided against further partnering provides us with additional insight about what works and what does not.

Methodology

As a way to measure our efforts at collaboration, a qualitative case study methodology was utilized. This allowed us to gain an in-depth understanding of a situation and provide meaning for those involved (Merriam, 1998). Multiple sources of data, allowing for triangulation, were collected and analyzed. First, teachers at both school sites and university faculty participated in semi-structured interviews at the end of the year. Second, teacher journals from both sites were collected and analyzed for

thoughts on collaboration. Lastly, an "Attitude Toward Collaboration" survey, adapted from the 1992 work by Mattessich and Monsey entitled *Collaboration: What makes it work*, was administered to teachers and faculty in the project.

Mattessich and Monsey's (1992) exhaustive review of the literature on collaboration delineates six main factors that make a collaboration successful. The factors include environment, membership characteristics, process and structure, communication, purpose, and resources. Environment refers to a history of collaboration or cooperation in the community, the perception of the collaborative group as a leader in the community, and the political and social climate related to collaborative efforts. Membership characteristics refer to mutual respect and trust within the group, an appropriate cross-section of members, the ability of members to view collaboration as in their self-interest, and the ability of members to compromise. Process/structure factors relate to members' sense of ownership, issues of decision-making, degrees of flexibility, the development of clear roles and policy guidelines, and adaptability of the group. Communication addresses how open and frequent members interact, and the establishment of informal and formal links. Purpose relates to goals and objectives which are attainable, a shared vision and a unique purpose. Resources refer to sufficient funds and a skilled convener.

Results

Semi-Structured Interviews: Teachers

Teachers were asked to comment on the collaborative efforts as part of a semi-structured interview conducted by the director of the project. The teachers at both schools (Site A N=4; Site B N=6) were positive about the collaborative nature of the LCL overall. They appreciated the opportunity to get to know their colleagues better and to have time to discuss, debrief, and process issues with these peers. This was a result of weekly half-day gatherings at each site with teachers and university faculty to reflect and discuss curricula etc.

Teachers also felt that collaboration with the university helped to "stretch" their thinking. They appreciated professional articles provided by faculty, and felt that they had improved their skills in working with interns. One teacher commented that "feeling a part of the university Teacher Development program was very rewarding." Unfortunately, there were also individual personality and philosophical differences between some teachers and faculty at Site B.

Teachers were asked if they felt more or less empowered through collaboration. All four of site A teachers responded affirmatively, while 4 of the 6 teachers at Site B provided positive responses. When asked whether they felt as if they were an important part of the collaborative effort, 8 of the 10 said yes, with the only two negative responses

coming from Site B teachers. Specific responses identified a feeling of camaraderie and connection that had not been previously experienced. The teachers commented on the power of being a "team player."

Semi-structured interviews: Faculty

University faculty felt that the collaborative efforts had both personal and institutional benefits. On a personal level, the building of relationships was one of the most positive aspects of the project. The opportunity to collaborate with P-3 classroom teachers and to work with the teachers in their context was rewarding. On the institutional level, the LCL provided for stronger relationships between the two institutions, increased the understanding of each about the other, and provided an opportunity for increased study and use of best practice.

Several faculty commented on the value of the cooperating teachers' input into the intern curriculum. All felt the value of the stronger link between practice and theory and the university classroom and field experiences. One faculty member from Site A felt the collaboration provided for the "sharing of expertise across boundaries" and went on to say, "It was some of the most time-consuming, hardest and most rewarding work I have ever done!" Faculty from Site B also discussed the value of working closely with cooperating teachers and learning "with them" about new issues. However, two of the three faculty members there felt the decision-making process was "disconnected from the

P-3 learner and the university intern. Site B was not adequately involved in the decision-making process because the university liaison stopped coming to site meetings." Several issues had arisen at Site B resulting in two of the three faculty pulling out of formal meetings for some time. This mushroomed into feelings of mistrust and frequent misperceptions.

Teacher Journals

The journals kept by the cooperating teachers were not specifically focused on collaboration, but an analysis of entries allowed for further understanding of the teachers' views on the process. Teachers from Site A commented frequently on the value of working together, not only with each other, but also with university faculty. One teacher commented that she was "challenged to think and grow beyond my expectations." Another commented, "Our connection to the professors is stronger and more comfortable." Teachers at Site B were also positive about collaborating. However, their responses were less positive than those of Site A individuals. For example, one teacher wrote, "I feel a part of a collaborative effort, but I think things progressed so fast and we took on so much that I feel this is an area in which we could do better." Another teacher wrote, "There was too much pressure to change." Another indicated that "I could not get to my personal professional goals this year because of all we had to do with the LCL."

Journal entries from teachers at Site B most often began with a positive expression, but most often ended with "but" statements about the collaboration in the project.

Faculty journals, when they were kept, were not available for analysis for this project. One of the comments made by the outside evaluator was that university faculty could have benefited from greater involvement and a realization that professional development in a collaboration is a shared experience in which all members learn from each other. It was sometimes difficult to ask the same things of faculty as was required of teachers. School and university cultures differed in their expectations for autonomy and workloads.

Attitude Toward Collaboration Survey

The Attitude Toward Collaboration survey (See appendix 1) was based on a review of literature conducted by the Wilder Foundation (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). The survey identified 23 individual collaboration factors grouped into six broad categories. Twenty-two of the 28 participants in the project completed the survey by rating each item from 1-4 (strongly disagree to strongly agree). The mean rating for each of the six categories is illustrated in Table 1. The environment was rated the highest of all factors ($\underline{M}$ = 3.33), followed by membership characteristics ($\underline{M}$ = 3.04). The purpose was rated the lowest of all factors ($\underline{M}$ = 2.07). Process and structure ($\underline{M}$ = 2.68, resources ($\underline{M}$ = 2.86), and communication ($\underline{M}$ = 2.89) all fell in the middle.

Table 1

Mean Ratings of Collaboration Factors for Total Group

FACTOR	MEAN	SD
Environment	3.33	.56
Membership Characteristics	3.04	.49
Process and structure	2.68	.67
Communication	2.89	.83
Purpose	2.07	.39
Resources	2.86	.63

While these data provide a global view, a more interesting picture emerges when we look at the ratings from the two sites. Table 2 provides the mean ratings from teachers and faculty at each site for the six factors. Results demonstrate that in all six areas, Site A teachers rated collaborative efforts more highly than the Site B teachers. In 5 of the 6 areas, university faculty from Site A rated collaborative efforts higher than university faculty from Site B, with the 6th factor being equal. The mean ratings recorded for the university faculty members at Site B were the lowest for all factors across all participants. The teacher ratings from Site B were lower than ratings from either the

teachers or the university faculty from Site A. On the other end, the teachers at Site A had the highest ratings for all factors.

Table 2

Mean Ratings of teachers (Tchrs) and university (Univ) faculty from Site A and Site B

Factor	Tchrs-Site A	Tchrs-Site B	Univ-Site A	Univ – Site B
Environment	3.40	3.13	3.50	2.67
Membership characteristics	3.40	2.70	2.93	2.47
Process and structure	3.07	2.25	2.67	1.83
Communication	3.33	2.50	2.67	1.89
Purpose	2.15	1.94	1.83	1.83
Resources	3.33	2.50	2.78	2.22

Lessons Learned

As we reflect on our collaborative efforts, we see distinct differences between our sites. The stories are very revealing. At the end of the first year of collaboration, Site A experienced enough success to carry on, and Site B lacked adequate commitment to

continue. Those decisions cannot all be traced to a year of partnering as each school had a unique history, politically and socially and with the university. However, the collaborative efforts resulted in a strengthening of Site A's previous relationships and work with the university, yet the same efforts were unable to alter what had existed at Site B. Additionally, at Site B the combination of participants and their working relationships and philosophies did nothing to assist positive collaboration.

In the final report of the LCL provided by the outside evaluator (Shaw, 1999), there was a more objective assessment of why Site B struggled more than Site A. Based on extensive interviews with players, the reviewer stated that, "The reason people gave for the problems with communication, turf, and confusion at this school site was 'there were strong personalities.' This may be one way to describe what happened, but more objectively, the problems were related to inadequate personal boundaries, inflexible attitudes, unclear roles, no forum for arbitrating disagreements, lack of trust, dropping out when things got difficult, lack of respect, insufficient collaboration training for both the university faculty and district teachers, lack of training in negotiation techniques, and inexperienced project leadership" (p. 25).

As we attempt to identify factors essential to developing successful partnerships, we realize that the area of greatest concern in our collaboration focused on defining a clear purpose for our work together. The fact that we began the partnership with grant

funds that forced us to address multiple curricular goals while trying to establish relationships and build trust was a stumbling block for us. We strongly urge new participants to place their original focus on building honest, trusting relationships as the foundation on which the partnership can build and grow.

We have also recognized that prior work and relationships across the institutions can be both positive and negative and can greatly impact future partnership attempts. There appeared to be strong, positive prior relationships between teachers and faculty at Site A. At Site B, few relationships existed before the partnership, but some teachers at the school harbored negative feelings about prior relationships with various faculty at the university. We know that it takes certain types of people labeled "boundary spanners" (Lampert, 1991) who are flexible, open, and willing to compromise, to make the work succeed. In the field of education, unfortunately, teachers at all levels are not always practiced boundary spanners.

Defining how to communicate and making sure that everyone feels their voice is heard in the process is also an essential element in partnerships. Despite time spent up front delineating decision-making groups and process, teachers and faculty at Site B indicated a lack of communication, not only at their site, but also across the project. Interestingly, an unforeseen problem lay in the fact that the site coordinator at Site B was not a teacher on special assignment from that school (as was the Site A coordinator)

which often had a negative impact on the team there. Some felt very strongly that all voices were not being heard. Participants at Site A had positive reactions to the level and types of communication that were taking place. Also several of the faculty at Site B had had previous experiences of feeling "unheard" at the university, a factor which could have added to the negative tenor at the site.

In response to the final question on the survey, "What additional comments, if any, do you feel are important in assessing the effectiveness of the collaboration efforts between District 742 and St. Cloud State University?", one person wrote:

> Finding people who can really work at understanding each institution's cultures, goals and needs and not put personal agendas at the forefront – people who truly know what compromise and collaboration are all about. People who are listeners and thinkers, respectful of others' needs and empathetic in actions and words; high level of professionalism in expression of ideas....appropriate use of language and honoring each others' views even though they may conflict; hearing everyone's contributions – not just a few...continued celebration of the successes and taking time for group process – not just completing the tasks. Asking frequently, 'What's the best for kids (students)?' Then personal agendas, power, ego and politics seem to be less significant when we ask as educators, 'What is best for learners?' The barriers that divide institutions and the people in those institutions seem to be seamless and less divisive.

We have learned much about working together and all its concomitant benefits and challenges. We have learned the value and risks of collaborative efforts. We know that not all collaborations are successful, yet we believe we are moving in the right direction. We recognize that honest, open, and on-going communication is the key to a successful partnership. In hindsight, had we taken a year to build relationships and trust,

to establish a shared vision, and to narrow our goals, we might have achieved greater success. However, the lessons we learned have been more beneficial than the process of learning them would have led us to believe. We know that we must continue to create opportunities to study what we do and to document both our successes and our failures.

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